

FLAMINGO BOY



Also by Michael Morpurgo

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FLAMINGO
BOY



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*For Alan, for Lorens,
and their mum and dad*





*With thanks to Anne-Sophie Deville who first introduced
us to her flamingos and to the beauty and mystery of her
beloved Camargue*



CHAPTER 1

Someone Called Vincent

I read it in a book once, when I was a boy. I don't remember what book it was from, but the story I have never forgotten. An old traveller is sitting on the steps of his gypsy caravan, drinking a mug of tea in the sunshine. He's stopped for a while, right in the middle of a roundabout, his tethered piebald horse grazing the grass verge nearby.

A police car pulls up. "You can't stop here," the policeman says.

"Morning, son," says the traveller. "You want some tea? Got plenty to spare." The policeman is rather nonplussed by this. No one has called him "son" for a very long time, and he rather likes it.

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“No time to stop for tea,” he says. “Thanks all the same. Where are you going, you and your horse?”

“Not sure,” says the traveller. “The old horse and me, we just follow the bend in the road, go wherever it takes us.”

“Nice horse,” the policeman says, his tone softening all the time.

“And where might you be off to, son, this fine day?” the old traveller asks him.

“Maybe I’ll do what you do,” replies the policeman. “Maybe I’ll just follow the bend in the road. Sounds like a good idea.” And off he goes, knowing full well he should have moved the old traveller on, but glad he hadn’t.

I don’t know why, but I have never forgotten that story. I am older these days, a lot older – over fifty now. And, when I think about it, I suppose that in my own way I was trying to do just what the old traveller had done, what that policeman said he would like to do. I was following the bend in the road. That’s what I was setting out to do, in the summer of 1982, which was a long time ago now, but I remember it all, as if it were yesterday. It’s another story I don’t forget. You don’t forget the stories and the people who change your life.

Someone Called Vincent

It began with a picture, a painting, two paintings really. In Art class at my primary school, Miss Weatherby – who was the best teacher I ever had – told us one day to “paint a story”. So I painted a picture of that same old traveller sitting on the steps of his gypsy caravan, his piebald horse grazing the grass nearby, and there was a police car in the painting too. I gave it a title, wrote it at the top: “Following the Bend in the Road”. Miss Weatherby said it was the best painting I had ever done – she said that a lot, but she meant it every time. I took it home. My mother also said it was brilliant, so brilliant that I should sign it, and she would hang it up on the wall in my bedroom, in pride of place, next to my boat picture.

Now, that other picture, the boat picture, is very important in the story, because my name is Vincent, Vincent Montague. Only my mother called me Vincent. My friends at school always called me “Monty”, or “Vince”, neither of which I have ever liked. I always liked to be known as Vincent. So, of course, I signed my picture “Vincent”.

My mother had it framed – she liked it that much – and hung it, as she said she would, on the wall above my bed.

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“There is only one place for this,” I remember her saying, as she stood back, head on one side, and admired it. “It looks perfect up there, doesn’t it? That’s just where it belongs.”

So there it was, my picture of the old traveller, hanging right beside my boat picture, the one that had always been there above my bed, that I had always loved: a painting of four boats on a beach, with the sea and sky behind. Strangely, it was also signed by “Vincent”, which was, of course, I am sure, one of the reasons why I had always loved it so much. But I hadn’t painted that one. Someone else had, someone else called Vincent.

My mother used to joke about it sometimes. “I like that boat picture, Vincent,” she would laugh, “but I prefer yours.” I loved her saying that, of course, but for years I never understood why it was that funny. I just thought she had a rather strange sense of humour, which was true. Anyway, both of these pictures became part of the landscape of my life as I grew up, from a carefree primary-school kid who loved cycling and camping, into a sixth-form student who loved poetry and dreaming – and



still camping – and was looking forward impatiently to whatever was coming next.

Gazing out of the window, which I so often did whilst I was supposed to be studying for my exams, down into the tiny walled garden of our suburban house in Watford, I might be absorbed for minutes on end watching a thrush cracking open a snail on the top of the wall. Everything and anything was more interesting to me than getting on with my work, even the washing line that was strung from the drainpipe on the garage across the garden to the weathervane on the shed, with pyjamas and shirts flapping in the wind; or perhaps my mother would be home after work, chatting over the wall to Mrs Donaldson next door, both of them out for a crafty smoke.

I was locked into interminable revision for my exams, dreading the day they would come, but longing to have them done and dusted, longing to have a life. I loved home, loved my mother, but I knew it was a small world I was living in, and I yearned to be gone, to be away from Watford, and off on my travels, to be following the bend in the road, like the old traveller in the story.